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# RESEARCH -- IF WE HAVE WHAT IT TAKES, DO WE USE IT?

CLA Standing Committee on Research and Development

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## "Research -- if we have what it takes, do we use it?"

It is my turn to lead you through some of the perplexing issues in this familiar conundrum. But first, a few words of warning:

- (1) Your chauffeur is not that familiar with the rules of the road; as the only non-Librarian on the Panel, my views may seem like they are coming from out of left field.
- (2) Your chauffeur may be a bit erratic, part of the time looking forward at where we are going and part of the time looking back over his shoulder at where we have been.
- (3) Your chauffeur is decidedly schizophrenic, part of the time acting as a neutral commentator, but liable to head off on a diversion to speak passionately to a captive audience about the International Development Research Centre.

Our point of departure is where the previous speakers left off. The picture that is emerging is rather ambiguous -- apathy among students towards research, a few encouraging signs on the horizon, but also a cautionary note on the practical constraints of the workplace.

## THE ROLE OF RESEARCH

I sense there is little to be gained by entering the debate over the definition of "research". We probably each have our own concept that works O.K. for us. Mine

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no.

tends towards the broader, all-encompassing end of the spectrum. But the point is, that if the profession ignores research opportunities to increase its understanding of the field of library science, it does so at its peril. Settling for the status quo would inevitably lead to a marginalization of the profession. And yet, ironically, the library profession is extremely well-placed to participate actively in interdisciplinary approaches to research, the current growth area for research in general.

## **RESEARCH AGENDAS**

Declaring that "research is a good thing" is O.K., but can we go further and identify the most fertile areas for research? In fact, even a cursory search demonstrates that there is no shortage of potential research entry points. Several documents provide food for thought on research priorities. Some different examples:

- \* Tadiboyina Venkateswarlu (1991). "Research Needs in Canadian Librarianship"
- \* Special Libraries Association. "Research Agenda"
- \* Dalhousie University (1990). "Organizing a Research Agenda: Information Studies for the 1990s"
- \* International Journal of Information and Library Research: "Scope of the Journal"

Clearly, there is no shortage of ideas to stimulate the formulation of research studies.

## **CHANNELS FOR SHARING RESEARCH**

So if research is important, and there are plenty of research entry points, how do we find out what is being accomplished? Are there many people actually undertaking research? Do they have effective channels for communicating their research results? Are new mechanisms needed? Do we need, as Prof. Wilkinson hints, a "Canadian Journal of Library Research" to increase the profile of research and improve access to research findings?

Again, it would appear that there are numerous channels of communication already available. Look at journals, for example. Here is a partial list of LIS-type journals received in IDRC's Library:

- \* African Research and Documentation
- \* ASLIB Proceedings
- \* Canadian Journal of Information Science
- \* Canadian Library Journal
- \* Documentation et bibliothèques
- \* Education for Information
- \* IFLA Journal
- \* Information Development
- \* Information Retrieval and Library Automation
- \* Information Services and Use
- \* Information Technology and Libraries
- \* International Journal of Information and Library Research
- \* International Library Review
- \* etc., etc., etc.

And "J" for journal is still to come. It would seem that the field is well-covered. As for a new Canadian journal of library research, if we print it -- will they come? I am not yet persuaded that this additional journal would necessarily find a market, generate more research, nor influence the adoption of research results; but more on this later.

Another channel for finding out about Canadian research projects in library and information science is through the database compiled by Carolyn Robertson at the Library Development Centre of the National Library. Brief updates appear in the *Canadian Library Journal* and in the *National Library News*. The database provides a useful window on the research scene, but it is not clear how comprehensive or representative the reporting is. An overview of this database was published last year by Diane Henderson (1991).

## UNDERLYING CONCERNS

An external observer examining the rich potential of the library science research scene in Canada might conclude at this point that all was well. But closer inspection reveals a persistent, underlying concern about the comparatively low research output of the library profession. Prof. Wilkinson happens to be the most recent commentator.

Let us recall the theme of this CLA conference, "Resource Sharing -- And the walls come tumbling down". Perhaps the most appropriate quote on library research comes from a paper by Mary Sue Stephenson (1991), entitled "Deciding Not to Build the Wall: Research and the Archival Profession". She writes, "*Association journals, editorials, research agendas, meetings, and so on, all constantly exhort librarians . . . to 'do research'. Library educators and practioners have spent enormous amounts of time and effort bemoaning the lack of participation in the research process by*

*practitioners, and the general lack of interest in applying the results of what research has been done to the reality of the workplace. Everyone sees the wall, dislikes the wall, wants to tear down the wall, but year by year it just seems to get higher and higher."*

## **IDRC**

Let me park here and begin my diversion in the direction of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). These paths will connect in a moment.

Perhaps some of you have heard of IDRC via its specialized development research Library, and its team of librarians (Carole Joling, Bev Chataway, Maureen Sly, Alain Lamirande, et al.) who are very active on the Canadian scene. IDRC is a distant cousin of CIDA. Since its creation in 1970, IDRC has become one of the major donors in the development research field. Over the past 20 years, IDRC has allocated over \$800 million in grants to support almost 5,000 research-related projects. Its own grant from the Parliament of Canada for 1991-1992 is \$115 million.

The business of IDRC is to promote the generation, sharing, and application of knowledge, the goal being to enable people in the developing regions of the world to improve their well-being. This translates succinctly into IDRC's mission statement, "Empowerment Through Knowledge".

Given this focus on knowledge, perhaps it is not surprising that one program area which has survived and prospered from the outset is the Information Sciences and Systems division (-- formerly the Information Sciences division). Indeed, the high profile that IDRC has accorded to "Information Science" (-- broadly defined) is unique among the international donor community. Since 1970, more than 600 information-related projects worth a total of \$120 million have been funded in 95 countries. A

compendium of articles on the evolution and experiences of the information sciences program has been published in a special issue of *Information Development* (Akhtar 1990).

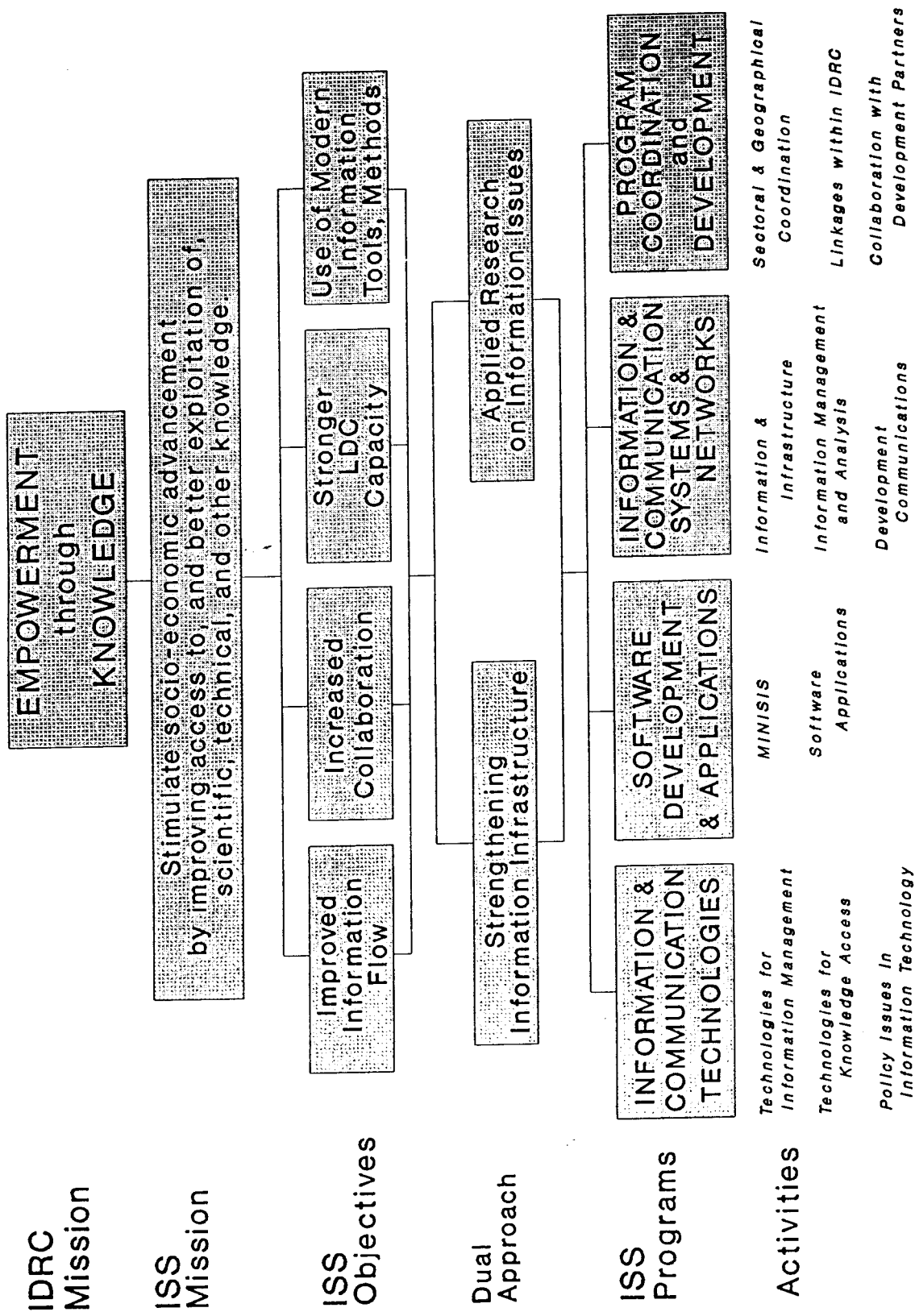
The initial priority of the division two decades ago was to establish international standards for information-sharing. In fact, the very first grant was to help create the OECD Macrothesaurus. The program then started to fund international bibliographic information systems in selected research sectors (such as AGRIS, DOCPAL, and DEVSIS), and has since continued to grow and expand into the various dimensions of information management. IDRC has supported a variety of activities including creating collaborative information networks and services, applied research on new information technologies, and training in special skills such as the marketing of information products and services.

The linkage between the program orientation of the Information Sciences and Systems division and the IDRC mission, Empowerment Through Knowledge, are represented in the accompanying figure.

In terms of our Canadian connection, there is no denying that IDRC has focused primarily on responding to research proposals originating in the developing countries. This has been deliberate policy, given the dearth of research funding available in those countries. But IDRC has always sought out meaningful collaborative projects involving partnerships between Canadian and developing-country researchers. Since the 1979 UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development, about 18% of the Centre's funds have been spent annually on this type of Canadian collaboration.

In the case of Information Sciences and Systems division, about 50 research grants have been made to Canadian institutions. In addition, several Canadian LIS

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ISS PROGRAM & MISSION OF IDRC



experts have been recruited as consultants to help us with special assignments such as technical trouble shooting, specialized training, and program evaluation. Recent examples of the latter include fixing the hypertext version of the UNCED's Agenda 21, a visiting professorship to help establish the MLS course at the University of the West Indies, and an evaluation of the division's past support for LIS training and postgraduate education in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

But returning to the more substantial research project in Canada, my search revealed somewhat surprisingly that only a handful of the 50 or so grants involved the Library Science community.

One of the few projects in this category involves an interesting mini-network of LIS schools in Senegal, Morocco, and Canada. They are collaborating on the design and development of computer-assisted learning material for the teaching of "informatique documentaire", i.e., specific applications of computer-based technologies to the field of library, archival, and information science. The Canadian team is led by Gilles Deschâtelets, of EBSI at l'Université de Montréal.

However, the majority of "Canadian" projects being supported by the division have been initiated from outside the Library Science community -- e.g., Departments of Geography/Environmental Studies/Agriculture, some specialized government agencies (CCOHS, CCRS), a few NGOs (CODE, Disabled Peoples' International), and others. But very few proposals for collaborative research come to us from the library profession. This rather bleak picture from IDRC's perspective brings me back to the start of my diversion, and reinforces the perception that the LIS community is missing out on research opportunities.



## **THE "WALLS"**

Borrowing from the published literature and from the other panelists, I have listed some of the major "walls" that confront us.

1.     **INDIFFERENCE/APATHY** towards research, because the research seems irrelevant to practical day-to-day needs, too "ivory tower" to be readily applied by practising librarians.
2.     **LACK OF SELF-CONFIDENCE** in own research capability, because the jargon of deductive or theoretical research limits the ability of outsiders to join in.
3.     **LACK OF AWARENESS OF RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES**, because of the emphasis placed on "academic" rather than applied research.
4.     **LIMITED TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES** to motivate and guide practising librarians on their initial research forays.
5.     **LITTLE INCENTIVE** for research, because it is accorded minimal significance by senior administrators.
6.     **INSUFFICIENT TIME** for research, because of too much "routine" work.
7.     **INSUFFICIENT FUNDS** for research, because of competing demands in a time of financial constraint.
8.     **LIMITED CHANNELS FOR PROMOTING RESEARCH**, despite the size of the profession and the significance of the field.

These "walls" are formidable, but not insurmountable if we pool our resources in a coordinated approach.

## **THE "RESOURCES"**

1. SENSITISE EDUCATORS about their responsibility to motivate students about the constructive and dynamic interaction between "research" and "practice". Research is not an isolated box.
2. BUILD RESEARCH COMPETENCE in students through compulsory exposure to research concepts, methodologies, and projects including practical, applied research.
3. INCREASE AWARENESS OF RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES, e.g., through improved educational approach, higher profile for research activities, systematic analysis of the research agenda, sharing experiences in professional associations, and more effective channels of communication.
4. DEVELOP ONGOING TRAINING-FOR-RESEARCH through innovative partnerships between educators and practitioners.
5. INCREASE INCENTIVES FOR RESEARCH, e.g., by promoting research performance as a factor in performance appraisal and career advancement.
6. CREATE TIME FOR RESEARCH, e.g., by (i) incorporating research activity as a legitimate component of the job description, (ii) increasing opportunities for sabbatical-type leave.

7. **GENERATE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH FUNDS**, e.g., by (i) demonstrating to senior management practical benefits flowing from research investments, (ii) identifying additional sources of funding; (iii) writing better proposals.
8. **EXPAND THE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS** for disseminating and promoting research, e.g., through special CLJ issues on research plus a regular CLJ section on research reports, and perhaps through publication of the CLA Conference proceedings.

## **IDRC AND RESOURCE-SHARING**

### **"USE IT!"**

In the spirit of the conference theme, let me propose the following practical suggestions on behalf of IDRC:

1. **ACCESS TO IDRC'S PROFESSIONAL STAFF AND VISITING PROJECT PERSONNEL** for seminars, lectures, etc.
2. **ACCESS TO IDRC'S "YOUNG CANADIAN RESEARCHER" AWARDS** at the Masters or Doctorate level in Library Science.
3. **ACCESS TO IDRC'S DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH LIBRARY**, including its **DEVELOPMENT DATABASES SERVICE**.
4. **ACCESS TO IDRC'S TECHNICAL PUBLICATIONS, VIDEOS, QUARTERLY MAGAZINE** to increase awareness of research activities.
5. **ACCESS TO IDRC'S INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF RESEARCH CONTACTS**.

6. ACCESS TO IDRC CONSULTING ASSIGNMENTS by joining IDRC's Expert Database.
7. ACCESS ON SABBATICAL TO IDRC'S FACILITIES, PERSONNEL, PROJECTS for visiting scholars.
8. ACCESS TO IDRC'S RESEARCH FUNDS for LIS research projects to be undertaken with developing-country partners.

## CONCLUSION

Of all the professions, it is Librarians who have responsibility for nurturing the knowledge base of our society. But interest in the many dimensions of organizing and accessing this resource seems to wane when it comes to creating new knowledge, i.e., research. And yet the potential is there, if only it could be triggered. Will 1992 be just like any other year? The pattern of discussion sounds a bit familiar -- a degree of professional self-criticism on the precarious status of research plus a few interesting insights and ideas. But afterwards, will today's good intentions about research be eaten up on Monday morning by the relentless operational demands of the workplace? Is it too naïve to hope for a breakthrough this year? Can we make 1992 a turning point?

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